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VII. Bedside Reading for the Child

Cinderella and the Frog:
An American Myth

William Kir-Stimon

Summary

The following article on marital dysfunction derived from a real life script, whose pattern I have seen repeated many times. It describes fairly typical oscillations in a tenuous balance between differently paced developmental styles.

In my clinical practice I have often seen what I now term the Cinderella and the Frog marital syndrome. The women, generally between the ages of 24 and 35, are typically referred by a gynecologist for treatment of a depressive, hysterical, or hypochondriacal state, accompanied by considerable channeling of anxiety in the pelvic area.

Historically for both partners, this is a first marriage now of three to ten years duration. The couple have two to five children, are in the middle income bracket, and in my own experience live in suburbia and appear to the outside world to possess an unusually happy marriage. They are just beginning perhaps to feel economically more comfortable than they have ever been. Suddenly a particular stress situation pulls down the facade. The precipitating stress is not difficult to ascertain: a new child, new home, or new community, enrollment of the first—or last—child in school, serious illness or death in her own or husband's family, new job or significant financial advancement for husband, desire for and inability to conceive another child, frigidity on her part or impotence on his, partial or full hysterectomy, some minor elective surgery, etc., etc. I believe that it is the cessation of socio-economic problems—not the stress—that is likely to trigger the full blown episode.

Cinderella has finally emerged a full-fledged princess and—to mix fairy tales—has been transforming her frog into a full-fledged or fledgling prince. She has been living out a child-like fantasy—composite of Hollywood and the Brothers Grimm, centered about anniversaries, holidays, minor family crises, and her own narcissistic image (enhanced by what her neighbors see as a powder-puff romance). With Froggy she has felt omnipotent, almost grandiose—part and parcel of the accepted societal image. The only probelm is that she wants him to be: a) bread-winner, b) lover, c) companion, d) lord-protector, e) God and King-father. The difficulty: Froggy just "ain't got it." She has handled him as she would a china Little Boy Blue, permitted him his intermittent tantrums and week-end freedoms, hovered over his cruel streaks and gaps in sensitivity, hoping the savior in him would really come through *for her!* She saw him as responsible for his salvation and he, for hers.

Cinderellas are usually bright and attractive women, discounted from childhood on. Their husbands have not encouraged their need to actualize their own intellectual and cultural interests. They tend to be verbal. They have at least one younger sister, with whom they are somewhat competitive, a subtly if not openly domineering mother, and a weak, frequently alcoholic father.

Our frog-prince-to-be seems dull, tends to be quietly aggressive and relatively successful on the job, provides for the family's economic needs but distances himself emotionally. Usually his mother is subtly or openly domineering. The father is either alcoholic or emotionally constricted,

yet he's managed to train his son to catch pop-flies.

Cinderella's consort follows a similar pattern. He hides behind the paper and television before and after meals. He hunts or frequents his froggy bars for relief. He will relate well to his offspring in their younger years and withdraw in time of adolescent stress, as if this were really too much for him to handle.

Many of the husbands lose interest in sexual relations and this indeed may date back to, during, or just after the honeymoon, except for periodic attempts by the wives to have them break their abstinence. Cinderella soon feels rejected, becomes hurt and discouraged, repels his advances, becomes "frigid" and convinced of her own lack of appeal and sexuality.

Comes the fateful day and the "good wife," with all her fantasy about a stable made-in-heaven marriage, rebels. She finds another love object who can momentarily provide for some of her emotional if not physical needs. For the first time since awakening her princeling she sees herself as a woman valued for herself rather than as her husband's surrogate mother and the mother of her little boy's children. She is frightened by the impact of her newly recognized feelings and tends to submerge them via a recurrent depressive and/or hysteric-like cover.

Meanwhile, as Froggy recognizes his own princehood he finds Cinderella not quite ready to accept his masculine sovereignty. As she becomes more and more aware of his pulling away, she is thrown into an internal panic. She develops a sacrificial masochistic stance, while simultaneously brushing up on the manipulative feminine skills.

As she becomes more demanding and Froggy more resistant, she places increasing emphasis upon externalia, appearance, and verbal "confrontation." However, as yet, nothing has "really happened."

When the young princeling begins to strike out, Cindy is lost. Her whole world collapses. There are occasional suicidal threats and some hysterical illness. In reaction, he reverts to his earlier froggyness. His skin hardens and strange epidermal protuberances begin to exhibit themselves. She is repelled and begins to look for other frogs to master as he once more slouches down before his froggy TV or falls asleep behind a beer.

Cindy comes alive again and threatens to leave. The situation continues to vacillate. The family tadpoles begin to show some aberrant behavior. Now Cindy, Froggy and the brood appear for professional help.

Usually, one of the children is placed at the apex of a family triangle.

Tiring of Cinderella's avowed needs and subtle attempts at ministration, the husband goes off into some fantasy of his own about Her and All Women, writes them off as impossible and incomprehensible (like his mother), and wends his way with his buddies *in extremis.*

Froggy can see himself as a Big Thing in the Little Pond or a Little Thing in the Big Pond. But he also knows that without her magic he relapses into an anxiety state.

As he develops he learns to deal with stress by imitating his fellow frogs-in-the-pond but seldom feels really competent on his own. Nevertheless by virtue of persistence and hard work he becomes relatively "successful" in a froggy way. Never able to quite free himself as a creative individual, he remains a respected and solid citizen of the community to which he addresses himself. He feels rejected when not accepted as a pal by his children yet on the whole tends to be a loner. Individual relationships with peers and group relationships tend to be superficial, supportive, and self-aggrandizing. In times of stress in the family he may even decide to take over the reins and for a while plays male with the checkbook but leaves most of the dirty work to the princess, who of course has the magic touch. Should she, on the other hand, need some support he tends to absent himself and hide in a fresh lily pond on their golf green. Even his escapes tend to be unimaginative.

The converse, of course, is the situation where Froggy suddenly awakens to realize he has lived most of his life in a sort of perpetual state of mesmerization. He has

conceived of himself as a second-class citizen so to speak, until he meets up with another Cinderella or perchance a princess-already-become. Then his anxiety reappears and he must handle in somewhat similar vein the conflicts now re-aroused within him. I find this rather rare, however, in the syndrome; it is considerably more likely that it is Cinderella-now-Princess who begins to shake the relationship up. This is also likely to occur as he becomes more aware of his submerged intelligence.

Prince-nee-Frog for his part often winds up with a Cinderella who is unable ever to see herself as a princess much less a queen-to-be. He may go on for a few years accepting his almost-regal role and Cinderella's ministrations as his royal perogative, but eventually he too may tire of this game playing. He wearies making demands and grabbing at what amounts to burnt offerings. When he is ready to "take" without the necessity for constant giving to maintain his own ego-regal role, she is often unaware of the depths of his needs and unlikely to accept the responsibility for anything other than the dutiful carpet-sweeping and kitchen chores. Like Cindy, he too needs a different kind of feeding and caring, an acceptance of him not as a different order being but as a fallible specimen with up and down moods, up and down needs, up and down competencies, etc. He hopes to relate on a need-to-need basis, with reciprocal acceptance of assets and shortcomings.

Crying out in his Froggy-loneliness, he finds that he must now supplant Cindy's missing progenitors-father and step-mother. He senses that her warmth and givingness mirror-wise reflect his, but he has not yet learned of the difference between loving and feeding.

Should either at this time in their development meet up with a prince or princess-in-the-process-of-becoming, they may break the impasse and move up to the next stage of metamorphosis: the King-Queen level. On the other hand, Prince or Princess may regress and the two remain stuck in the Cinderella-Frog lock-step. He, forever awaiting the kiss of maturity; and she, forever disappointed in his inability to provide her with the regal gown and glass slippers.

As one can see, there are delicate balances to maintain here if either Cinderella or the Frog is to move on and many dangers inherent in one's becoming metamorphosed at the expense of or without-the-other. In brief the developmental life process must cease, or continue its passage to full maturity. However, cessation leads to regression and one sees then the perennial resurgence of cyclic Cinderella-Froggy relationships.

In those rare instances when King and queen do meet, an entire world of creativity is unleashed. Any children are given the opportunity to develop their own potential regalities unhampered by the defensiveness of either consort. However, where one partner or the other remains in a relatively dominant position rather than in mutual (not reciprocal) relatedness, the offspring tend to flounder and develop identity problems. Obviously "tampering" with whatever emotional equilibrium the family constellation has made often results in crystallization of the core problem. One may then see i) a breakdown in the stereotypic inter-action: Prince-Princess, Cinderella-Frog, Prince-Cinderella, King-Princess, Queen-Prince relations, ii) a reshuffling of roles or partners with the selfsame confusion repeated, or iii) an honest self-reappraisal that may indeed result in a King-Queen relationship. Cinderellas and Frogs have a long history in our society, and are well known to radio, television, and motion picture audiences.

William Kir-Stimon lives and works in Flossmoor, Illinois.